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## THE POLICE AND SOCIETY IN POLAND. THE ROAD TO SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

## ABSTRACT

The scope of the paper is to identify, confirm and describe the recent breaches in the mutual relation between the Police and society in Poland. The perspective is the clear and consequent road to social acceptance that the Polish Police undertook in 1990 and proceeded with success until recent events. The authors desk research current sources of data regarding the Police relationship with and acceptance by the society in Poland: trust in Police surveys' results; critical, publicly available opinions of authorities, statistical data regarding Police work during the Covid restrictions time and women' protests in Poland (2020-2021). The results show a decisive shake of the Police-society relationship and the negative impact of COVID-19 and women demonstrations' handling by the Police on the formation's image. The critical circumstances of the pandemic were clearly a moment of testing to the Police-society trust and it gives the assumption to doubt the high levels of trust pre-pandemic. The threat of politicisation of the formation is also a major factor as well as the condition of state in general.

**KEYWORDS:** *Police, Poland, Covid-19, society, social acceptance*

## INTRODUCTION

The police in Poland, since their formation, that is, since 1990, when they replaced their communist counterpart, the Civic Militia, on the wave of political transformation, made considerable internal changes. Specially cooperation with the relevant services in Europe and the USA, and Poland's aspirations to membership in the European Union, which were successful in 2004, were factors that contributed to shaping the democratic image of this service. The police in Poland want to see themselves as an auxiliary formation to a democratic society, seeking social acceptance and cooperation with social entities and citizens in performing the tasks entrusted to them. However, recent years, the initial turning point of which is generally perceived when the Law and Justice party came to power in Poland (2015), despite the declarative adherence to such pro-social slogans by the formation, in practice show an increasing split between the Police and society, a lack of trust, respect for this service, lack of willingness to cooperate and subordinate. The authors examine whether

such a belief is confirmed by the data and what are the possible reasons for lowering the social acceptance of the Police.

## CONTEXT

### THE NEED FOR CHANGE AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS

In 1989, in Poland, and then in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, profound and thoroughly revolutionary economic, political and systemic changes took place. One of the main social demands was the need to reform the services responsible for security and public order. In the new situation, Polish society expected the welfare and humanitarian police, which is why the Police Act of 1990 emphasized the duty of policemen to respect the dignity of citizens and to respect and protect human rights. Due to the infamous experiences of the past, the authors of the law seriously limited the powers of a police officer. Particular emphasis was placed on the function of the police as a *public utility* institution, and the policeman – a compliant guardian. Expectations going in this direction were connected with emphasizing the necessity of a strong *embedding* and binding of the police to the environment at the lowest level – the area of residence. Therefore, it was decided to establish a local police force. The police stations were to focus on shaping proper relations with local communities by performing only preventive functions (Majer et al. 1997, p. 70). In the Polish reality, it was the first attempt to create policy units whose primary task was to create the basis for cooperation with the society.

The above-mentioned expectations were reflected in the statements of the new Police leadership – the deputy chief commander, col. Bogusław Strzelecki:

*Well, I would like to see such times when helping our police will be a moral duty and an honour to every citizen. Before that, however, we must painstakingly regain social trust, step by step. This is an indispensable condition for a successful business. Only wise, well-trained officers in rationally built structures of the new police can achieve this goal. You have to hire a lot of them – very good ones, eminently predisposed to this job. Then there will be internal healthy*

*competition and it will be more effective than multi-stage supervision.* (Trzeba przyjąć... 1990, pp. 4-5)

## **THE FIGURE OF A DISTRICT POLICEMAN, A CONNECTOR WITH THE SOCIETY**

The reformed Polish police also tried to use the militia's experience in communicating with members of local communities. Such an example was the function of a district policeman. Apart from political conditions, he had a very good understanding of the environment in which he carried out his official tasks. Therefore, attempts were made, with mediocre results, to transfer it to the new socio-economic realities. According to the position presented for years by the Police Management, the function of the district policeman is to be one of the key functions for the effective implementation of the tasks of the entire Police. The opinions presented in this regard show that the district policeman should act as a *connector* between the Police and the society, be the host and animator of undertakings aimed at preventing crime in the area assigned to him, and have a long-term effect on increasing the level of safety and public order in his area. It is also indicated that due to the wide range of tasks (listed in Zarządzenie KGP 2007), district policemen should have special qualifications and experience, and this position should be a kind of crowning service in local Police units (Informacja o wynikach kontroli 2022).

The district policeman was to fulfil the role of a contact policeman, similar to the English one. However, in the Polish reality, after the political changes, it was not possible to achieve the intended goals. For the inhabitants, he was an unknown figure with whom there was no natural contact. Currently, 7,700 district policemen serve in the Polish police, which constitutes about 8% of the number of members of this formation and over 12% of the total number of preventive officers. In each town, throughout the country, district areas have been separated, assigned individually to individual officers, therefore each of us has *his own district policeman*. According to social research, approx. 60% of the inhabitants of the districts do not know their district officer (Cielecki 2004, p. 254). Therefore, due to the low activity and recognition among the

inhabitants, district policemen are compared to the legendary Yeti, whose existence is mentioned by everyone and no one has ever seen it. There are also numerous opinions, presented, among others, by the policemen themselves on various Internet forums, about a low position of district officers in the police hierarchy and their excessive exploitation for various tasks not directly related to the duties of this group of officers.

## DIFFICULTY ADAPTING TO NEW REALITIES

In the first half of the nineties, the country's economic situation was deteriorating due to the introduction of the principles of a free market economy in place of the centrally planned and extremely nationalized economy. Its side effect was the pauperization of society and a sharp increase in crime, especially criminal. The enormous technical and logistical backwardness in the equipment of the Police was realized. At the same time, the share of Police spending in the state budget was becoming increasingly unsatisfactory. Successive governments and parliamentarians (consciously or unconsciously) did not show much interest in the issues of public safety. One more characteristic thing: since then, a tendency to create intra-police commissions and teams that were to reform and create an effective institution has developed (Zespół doradczy 1994).

Then the keywords appeared, which were used over and over again in the following years in the hope that they would solve the problems. This type of action also includes the never-ending reform consisting in constant reorganization and civilization of police jobs. However, this stream of words contains a certain self-critical reflection: *Let me put it straight: we are not mentally prepared for the changes taking place. The aggression of criminal circles began to overwhelm us. We have not yet freed ourselves from the pillory of old social judgements, those from the time of martial law. And yet we managed to break the barriers of distrust, as evidenced by the results of public opinion polls.* (Zespół doradczy 1994)

During this period, symptoms of improvement in public sentiment were already visible, as well as the effects of using the best experiences and models in the field of police-society cooperation in the framework of cooperation with the police of Western Europe and the USA. It was a period when the police

began to use some primitive, but effective tools of public relations. Attempts were also made to change the image of the Police chief and rank and file policemen in relations with the society. The next Police Commander in Chief stated in one of the statements:

*“There are over a dozen of equal problems, but what I care most about is the change in the quality of the police service. I wonder how to reach over 57,000 policemen who serve on the street and convince them that they have to look at their duties differently, adopt a different style of work. The policeman is to protect and help the citizen. It is to show interest in the situation in which the person in need has found himself, to show him concern and understanding... This profession requires social maturity and sensitivity to what is happening around him, a human approach to the matter and iron determination from the first day of service.*

*We all remember the image of a policeman sitting or dozing off in a police car too well, lurking somewhere by the road to get a ticket, reluctant when we report a crime and ask for help; arrogant when we are, even accidentally, offenders.*

*By presenting these facts, I want the policemen to realize that we need to change the style of work. In all countries, a policeman supported by taxpayers' money serves that taxpayer. The physical presence of a policeman on the street or a patrol is not enough, you also have to give something. You have to take care of completely unknown people, work in such a way that you can see commitment.”* (Cierlica 1995, pp. 2-3)

A new proposal to improve the state of public safety was to be crime prevention, the quintessence of which was the *Safe city* program. This design was modelled on the English experiences of the 1980s. In its implementation, mechanical duplicated patterns were visible, while there was no adaptation of ideas to local needs. However, it was a symptom of the changes taking place in the functioning of the Polish police. It consisted in a slow departure from the traditional, repressive nature of the activity, which had its roots in the previous political and social period. More and more attention was paid to the need to create proper relations with the society, the police Staff was equipped with appropriate social communication skills, and above all, with increasing social acceptance.

## TOWARDS DECENTRALIZATION

It is a truism to say that the model of a decentralized state, based on a large share of local government in the implementation of public affairs, allows for more effective implementation of crime prevention initiatives with the active participation of local communities. In Poland, in 1990, the reconstruction of the municipal self-government was initiated. However, it was not until the end of the nineties that deep systemic reforms of the state were carried out in Poland, which changed the role of the Police in the public administration system. *Revolutionary* aspect of these changes, among others, consisted in including the Police in the combined administration at the field level. Therefore, it was necessary to undertake measures to adapt the police services to operate in the new legal and organizational environment.

After all, the period from 1998 to 2001 should be considered the most creative and fruitful period for the Police. It was then that a modern institution operating in a democratic society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was created.

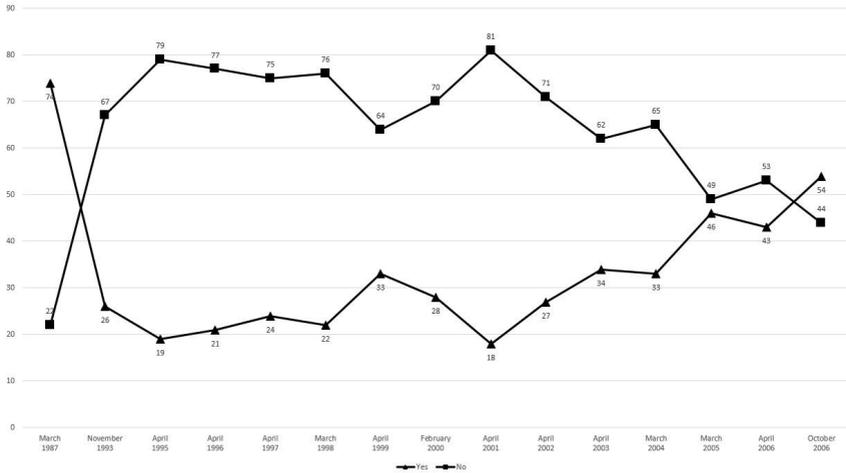
*First of all, we have adapted our structures and organization to the new state public administration system. In addition, we have changed, or in fact we are changing, the entire philosophy of the functioning of the Police in relation to local communities. In the area of prevention, we become a tool in their hands, they can define goals for us, demand specific preventive actions. Responsibility for the general state of safety has passed to the voivodes – government representatives in the field. On the other hand, in the area of prosecuting the most dangerous crimes, we centralized the divisions combating organized and drug crime in order to exclude them from local conditions and possible influences. This model of police has proven itself in many democratic countries. I am sure that the reform will also be successful in Poland... I have been emphasizing all the time and I still do that the essence of this reform is the departure from the omnipotence of the headquarters. Many times in the past we found out that the Police Headquarters is not able to cover all the issues related to the professional group of 100,000 people. The police reform primarily resulted from these experiences. On their basis, we developed mechanisms for the necessary changes. We gave many authorizations and a lot of power to voivodeship and powiat commanders. Today, the term – decentralization of human and financial powers is no longer a cliché. (Miśkiewicz 1999, p. 2)*

These changes in the political system of the state made it possible for local communities to influence the local government on the appointment of managerial positions in police stations and posts, i.e. basic organizational units of the Police. The possibility of financing police posts in the prevention section by municipal governments was created. However, the most important thing was the influence of the inhabitants on the local security policy. Plans for the prevention of crime and social pathologies were developed together with the police, platforms for cooperation in the form of poviats commissions of safety and public order were created, or city safety maps were created through public consultations, e.g. in 2003 in Warsaw. Finally, in 2007, a program of preventive and prophylactic actions, *Safer Together*, was initiated, aimed at supporting the implementation of statutory activities of government administration and local government bodies for safety and public order. The *Safer Together* program was the first governmental program which main goal was to activate and support local initiatives to improve safety and public order. The police substantively supported the implemented projects by cooperating in their implementation with non-governmental organizations.

## SUCCESS

The results of many years of activities were the results of public opinion polls on the sense of security. The high macro insecurity rate of 70%-80% throughout the 1990s began to decline dramatically at the beginning of the 21st century. In 2006, positive opinions prevailed for the first time since the beginning of the political transformation in Poland. This proves that many years of activities at the systemic level – decentralization of the state, regarding the functioning of the Police – modernizing its activities, changing its image, developing appropriate methods of cooperation with local communities and at the social level – creating a civic society lead to the results presented in the graph.

However, as we write later in the article, this is not a continuing positive trend in police-society cooperation. Recent years have brought, according to the authors, a significant regression.

**Figure 1.** *Is Poland a safe country to live in? (Survey results from 1987-2006).*

On the base of: *Czy na co dzień czujemy się bezpiecznie? Komunikat z badań*, CBOS 2007, CBOS, [www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2007/K\\_077\\_07.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2007/K_077_07.PDF), s. 3.

## METHODS

For the purposes of the article, the topic was examined using the desk research method. There are sources of data that can be used and, in the authors' opinion, are sufficient to draw preliminary conclusions. The study of the topic is based on three groups of sources. Firstly, regular surveys of the level of Poles' trust in public institutions, including the Police, carried out by professional research centres – the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS), the Institute for Market and Social Research (IBRIS), the Central Statistical Office (CSO) and IPSOS. While analysing the level of Poles' trust in Police in particular years, an attempt was made to highlight what events could have influenced the changes in the perception of this service. Secondly, an analysis of publicly expressed opinions on changes in the Police and on the behaviour of the police during events that are critical to social life was carried out. The authors of the statements are authorities such as the Ombudsman,

former Police Commander in Chief, former Ministers of the Interior, and also collectively the Association of Police Generals of the Republic of Poland and non-governmental organizations. Thirdly, the official police statistics concerning the police intervention and the security of demonstrations by the police were analysed. In the first case, the so-called Covid interventions (fines for failure to wear a protective mask on the mouth and nose, police checking compliance with the quarantine obligation, checking compliance with Covid restrictions). In the second case, it is about the number of Covid fines on the so-called women's strikes – we explain in detail below. The extent of the Police's involvement in securing the population during a pandemic is an important factor which, without the intention of the Police itself (they became the executor of government regulations), led to the lowering of the rank of this service in the eyes of Poles. It is related to doubts as to the legality of Covid regulations (and not statutes) limiting citizens' freedoms at the time without the introduction of a state of emergency, which will be discussed further on.

## FINDINGS

### TRUST IN THE POLICE

The data considered in this article include individual editions of the survey of social trust of Poles conducted by CBOS using the method of computer-assisted face-to-face interviews (CAPI) on a representative random sample of adult Polish residents (usually approx. 1,000 people). Among the entities from the public sphere towards which Poles expressed their trust in this survey, in a survey of February 6-16, 2020, the Police are trusted by 71%, and 21% does not trust. 8% is undecided (Komunikat z badań 2020, p. 9). This is one of the highest results of trust in the Police in CBOS surveys, which are repeated every two years, every even year. The Police obtained a better result in this study in 2008 (75% of trust), however since 2010, according to the CBOS survey, trust in the Police has continued to grow (Komunikat z badań 2020, p.11).

For example, in 2015, a survey on social trust (included in the larger social cohesion survey, on a sample of 14,000 people) was also carried out by

a state institution, the Central Statistical Office. According to this study, 67% of Poles trusted the Police (Jakość życia w Polsce 2015, p. 1), which gives credibility to the results of the CBOS survey from 2016. Why should we look for credibility of reliable research conducted by CBOS at all? We see at least two reasons. Firstly, in recent years, when the image of the Police has been weakened by the strategy of this service implemented by political and police decision-makers and the behaviour of individual (groups) of officers during the so-called *women's strikes* and during the *Covid* interventions, alternative studies were carried out, indicating a collapse in the level of trust of Poles in the Police. More about it in the next part of the article. Secondly, CBOS, existing since 1982, was entrusted in 1997 by the Sejm of the Republic of Poland to conduct social research for public use. Since then, representatives of the Sejm, Senate, the President and the Prime Minister have sat on the CBOS council. The most important studies, such as those on social trust, are separate and commissioned by government institutions, for example, Ministry of the Interior (CBOS website). In 2020, the survey was carried out in February, which is important, because there was no chance to capture a decrease in trust in the Police as a result of current events (see below), and in 2018 this flagship survey of social trust was not carried out at all, so when it comes to a CBOS research, the gap between individual editions makes it impossible to gain knowledge about the reaction of society to important social phenomena. In place of this study, in 2018 a very similar study *On distrust and trust* was carried out, which omitted the Police (Komunikat z badań 2018, p. 7, p. 9). A similar omission already took place in 2014, but the one from 2018 was somewhat replaced, as we mentioned, with studies of other centres, which we will now move on to. It is on their basis that one can now draw conclusions other than the conclusion that at the beginning of 2020 the Police were trusted by an almost record number of Poles (according to the CBOS study already mentioned).

The so-called women's strike is a mass social protest in Poland at the end of 2020 and at the very beginning of 2021 in response to the tightening of abortion laws. In Poland, since 1993, regulations allowing abortion were in force only in three cases: if the pregnancy endangers the mother's life, if there are suspicions of irreversible, serious damage to the foetus, and if the

pregnancy is a result of a prohibited act. In 2019, a group of deputies representing a conservative worldview submitted a request to the Constitutional Tribunal to examine the compliance of the second of the three premises with the Polish Constitution, which requires the protection of life from conception (art. 38). Back then, in April 2019, protests already took place. The Constitutional Tribunal, like other central judicial institutions in Poland, has been subject to reforms in recent years, the legality of which is in doubt both in Poland and in international bodies (e.g. EU proceedings against Poland). In its judgement of October 22, 2022, the Constitutional Tribunal stated that the abortion regulations were inconsistent with the Constitution, thus further restricting the right to abortion – the second premise constituted approx. 99% of justifications in the case of legal abortions (Ile aborcji... 2020). The verdict became a catalyst for mass protests in Poland, which took place in many cities and numbered up to 100,000 people (Na Warszawę... 2020). The so-called women's marches were anti-government, but also anti-church. The Catholic Church in Poland supported the tightening of abortion regulations (Tweet arcybiskup Gądecki 2020). This in turn was met with a response in the form of counter-protests that called for the protection of churches from intrusion and disruption of the liturgy. Such events did take place (Chronię... 2020). The counter-protesters accused the protesters of vulgarity and aggression (Opozycja wspiera... 2020). On October 30, 2020, a great march took place in Warsaw. Protests in January 2021 arose in connection with the official publication of the above-described judgement.

The behaviour of the police has evolved during this time. Initially, the Police did not take any active steps against the protests, and after some time, churches, parliamentary offices and houses of right-wing politicians were protected, where the crowds were demonstrating. Political pressure was put on the police (the service, according to the Police Act of 1990, apolitical). Therefore, the Police Commander in Chief was against the aggravation of policemen's behaviour towards the protesters, threatening to resign if the pressure continued (Baczyński 2020). Ultimately, however, there was a change in the attitude of the police, and Chief Commander of the Police did not leave. From November 2020, the activities were tightened by the order of the Warsaw Police Commander (Baczyński 2020) and the so-called Covid regulations have been

invoked. On their basis, all protests during the pandemic were considered illegal, protesters were locked, fines for breaking sanitary regulations were given and cases were referred to the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate (Sanepid). The highest representatives of the National Prosecutor's Office and the Ministry of Justice began to inform publicly that participation in the protests will be considered a prohibited act, threatening health and life, punishable by imprisonment (Prokuratura chce... 2020)

Among the outrageous media information about the behaviour of the police that have circulated public opinion, it is worth mentioning a few. These cases are brought to court, where they are verified and, if necessary, the consequences are drawn; here we are only concerned with identifying what messages about the police have been widely spread to the public. The criticized actions of the police include: handcuffing a deputy, spraying the deputy with tear gas, a policeman attacking the deputy speaker of the Sejm (Policja komentuje... 2020) (these people have immunity); the use of physical force against the protesters, the use of arcing grenades, truncheons, incapacitating gas, chasing the protesters into the groups and catching/legitimizing them, in particular the incident when unguarded and unmarked officers of the Bureau of Anti-Terrorist Operations mingled into the crowd used telescopic truncheons against the protesters (Górski 2020); entry of the Police to the premises of the Warsaw University of Technology without the rector's consent (the autonomy of universities in Poland is traditionally respected) (Policja bezprawnie... 2020); accusations of tugging and strangling at the police station (Bukłaha 2021); lack of police protection for protesters against aggression by counter-protesters, armed with gas, truncheons (Szymczak 2020), etc. This should be accompanied by data on the number of *Covid* seats at the protests, after the aforementioned change in the attitude of the police towards the protesters. It is also worth remembering that about 17,000 policewomen work in the Polish Police (Stan osobowy... 2021), regardless of that, all policemen represent different social and political sensitivity in private life. The public heard voices about the dissonance among policemen who did not want to stand up against the protesters and even joined the protest (Wójcik 2020).

The Institute for Market and Social Research (IBRIS), also a respected research centre in Poland, at the request of one of the Internet portals, Interia.

pl, conducted an alternative to CBOS surveys of trust in the Police. The survey was carried out after the intense protests described above, on November 20-21, 2020, using the telephone method, standardized computer-assisted questionnaire interviews (CATI) on a representative sample of 1,100 Poles who answered the question: *What is your attitude towards various public institutions: the police*. The results of this survey indicate that the Police are trusted by only 44.1% of the respondents. 33.1% of the Poles do not trust the Police at all. In turn, 18.7% of the survey participants show an indifferent attitude towards the Police (Sondaż dla Interii 2020). Since IBRIS carried out exactly the same survey for Interia.pl in 2017, it is possible to compare these two results – the levels of trust and distrust towards the Police. In 2017, the Police were trusted by 64.2% of respondents, so the decrease between 2017 and 2020 is approximately 20 percentage points. It is worth noting that the 2020 survey comes from the second half of November, i.e. when the police have been confronting the situation of nationwide protests for a month. The drop in trust is all the more devastating in the assessment of the work of the police, if you compare this result with the CBOS survey from the beginning of 2020 (71% trusting the Police). Then you can talk about a 30% difference in percentage. Between the two IBRIS studies, indifference towards the police also increased (by 6 percentage points).

At the beginning of 2021 (February 10-12), another recognized research centre, Ipsos, conducted a survey in a similar methodology (CATI method on a nationwide representative sample of adult Poles N=1014). However, it asked more specific questions. For example, the question: *After the police reactions to the Women's Strike demonstrations, did your trust in the police increase or decrease?*, as many as 59% replied that it decreased. Only Law and Justice voters, the ruling party in Poland, showed an increase in their trust in the police. Among city dwellers and among young people, and therefore among the main participants in the protests, trust has declined significantly: among respondents aged 18-29, 74% replied that their confidence had dropped; inhabitants of cities with 100-500,000 inhabitants – 66% drop in trust, cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants – 71% decrease (Danielewski 2021). It is worth noting that police recruitment has been very weak in recent years. The police are poorly paid, the path of promotion is arduous, the beginnings in

formation are usually difficult and require sacrifice on the part of the candidate. If, in addition, young people do not trust this service, one should expect further shortages of staff or weaker candidates that the police will be forced to accept (Ruszkiewicz 2018).

Finally, in March 2020, CBOS returned to traditional research. Trust in the police was estimated at 63% (Komunikat z badań 2022, p. 8). The result shows a slight rebound from the trust level of 59% (Ipsos survey from 2021), but these are only four points of difference and far from the 71% level that the public declared before the pandemic and social strikes (CBOS survey from 2020). 2022 passed in Poland without social unrest, and Covid restrictions were basically withdrawn. The public debate was dominated by the war in Ukraine, the admission of refugees and a number of topics related to the significant deterioration of the economic situation (inflation, gas and coal prices, etc.). The police became less visible, the public did not have the daily opportunity to observe the behaviour of officers in the streets and in the media. However, in CBOS 2022 research, the Police still gets 63% of trust from the public (Komunikat z badań 2022, p. 8) and it does not want to rise any higher. Furthermore, Instytut Finansów, a unit of the Ministry of Finance, responsible for data collection and analysis, in June 2023 released a survey results on trust in public and private lives of Poles, showing that policemen are trusted only in 58 %, they were included in the third group as far as trust ranking, together with f.e. board guards (56%) and were less trusted than firemen (68%) and soldiers (63%) (the second group) (Zaufanie Polaków..., p. 4). Board guards were publicly seen and obviously more judged by citizens from summer 2021 on due to the Polish-Belarus border crisis. It can be the case that Poles are generally more in favour of these uniformed formations which work in silence and a kind of invisibility and for sure do not interfere in hot political topics. A different research, UCE Research, conducted for online news portal Onet.pl shocks with a result of only 46,6 % of Poles having trust in Police (Piasecka 2023). In a word of conclusion it's worth mentioning that despite the drop in trust in some security forces, Poles in 2022 and 2023 in 83 and 88 % feel safe in Poland (Poczucie bezpieczeństwa... 2023, p. 2), (Poczucie bezpieczeństwa... 2022, p. 2). The fact that beyond the Polish-Ukrainian border there is a real war area is a probable incentive to appreciate the state

of affairs in Poland. For the Police, as there were circumstances that certainly put the trust of citizens in doubt (Covid-19 handling and women manifestations), but no initiatives to repair the image from within the formation, just the *business as usual* for two 2-3 years up to the moment of loss of power by Law and Justice, new government and the very recent (December 2023) talks about the necessary change of the Commander in Chief, there is no surprise that the trust rate stays at its lowered grade.

## CRITICISM FROM THE AUTHORITIES

The very fact that the former heads of the Police recognized, and in a large number of people, that the circumstances forced them to appeal to the Police, says a lot. On November 1, 2020, more than 200 retired generals and admirals signed an appeal addressed to politicians, policemen, protesters and moral authorities. The police were reminded of the oath to serve the nation and protect the legal order established by the constitution. History was cited as a warning not to escalate force and not to cause casualties in the streets. The generals and admirals made their appeal, considering themselves to be a body that has the right to warn against dangerous consequences (Stowarzyszenie Generałów... 2021). The former Chief Commander of the Police or the Ministry of the Interior also spoke separately. Adam Rapacki, former deputy Chief Commander of the Police and former deputy interior minister, tried to defend the behaviour of the police in several media statements, not to rash opinions about their behaviour, but above all blamed the rulers who were escalating the social conflict. Rapacki notices the social criticism of the police, but blames anyone other than the police for it and urges them to change. *It is sad, because the police have been building social trust for many years, and at a time when a political conflict arises, they become a child for beating* (Rapacki 2020). At most, the police *oversize their strength*, show *over-zealousness*, hence, as he explains, statements by former police chiefs who want to remind them of the principles of service to society, law-abiding and apoliticality. In another interview, after the police's stricter stance on the protesters and in the face of a dramatic drop in public confidence in it, Rapacki appeals for the sense

and decency of the policemen (Ragojsz 2020). In a media statement, Andrzej Matejuk, also the former Chief Commander of the Police, demanded that a special commission be appointed to deal with the numerous outrageous allegations at the border between the police and protesters (Matejuk 2020). He also warned that mocking the police and losing their trust would result in relaxation and demotivation in the formation itself, and that spending a lot of effort to protect protests would reveal gaps in police work in other fields and embolden criminals who would take advantage of it. Most of the statements of the former police superiors, however, show concern for the formation itself, so that in the event of a politically fuelled conflict, the police will not lose public support and lost the social capital they have built (Banachowicz 2020).

On October 29, 2020, the Statement of social organizations on the current social crisis (Oświadczenie organizacji 2020) was published, signed by 39 organizations. Here the police are not mentioned by name. Criticism is directed at the government, which *openly threatens with state violence*. It also *instrumentally uses state institutions* (including the police), *refuses to recognize the subjectivity of the protesters* (also *with the hands of the police*). This statement is a statement which ignores the police, but in a meaningful way, recognizes that it is fully subject to the authority.

Another entity that has spoken out many times is the Human Rights Ombudsman. Here, the involvement of the citizens and the criticism of those in power as well as the actions of the police was very clear. Moreover, as an institution with relatively high control powers, it uses factual data analysis and reports, not just statements. Let us cite a few examples. From October to December 2020, employees of the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture, operating at the Human Rights Ombudsman, analysed the statements of the detained protesters. *The brutality of the police during the intervention, the unjustified use of gas, handcuffs, beating with truncheons and insults are worrying*, as well as deportation to detention outside Warsaw (place of protests), although there was a place to be detained in Warsaw (Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich 2021). The Ombudsman criticized the blocking by the Police of critical (but culturally expressed) comments about their activities posted on police portals as contrary to art. 54 of the constitution on freedom of expression (Dlaczego policja... 2021). The Ombudsman was also personally

present in the media, commenting on the different treatment of protesters by the police depending on their attitudes and the use of covid regulations to limit the right to protest (Bodnar 2020). As for the Ombudsman, only exemplary statements were quoted.

Former Police authorities continued to express their concerns and raise the public debate long after the *Covid-19 era* and up to now, when in December 2023 the opposition to the Law and Justice took back power in Poland after 8 years and there are chances that the wind of change will not omit the Police. On March, 21st, 2023, the Federation of Uniformed Formations' Associations published a text entitled: *The most important things to fix*, where restoration of prosocial attitudes of policemen was mentioned (Najważniejsze sprawy...). On June, 29th, 2023 an expert debate was held in the building of the Polish Parliament (Sejm) by former Police heads (Adam Rapacki, Michał Domaradzki, Arkadiusz Letkiewicz, Rafał Batkowski) and the Members of the Parliament (supposedly from the Opposition) under a somehow provoking title: *The Polish Police after the Law and Justice Government – how to restore the operations efficiency and citizens' trust?* (Debata ekspercka). Some of the expert opinions addressed specific problems rather than general negative trends in the Police, f.e. the 13 000 vacant posts in the Polish Police and discouraged morals of those who stayed (Kruk 2023). One of the most active experts, general Adam Rapacki pointed out that the standards and the accountability of policemen, from the Commander in Chief to the average policeman also dropped (Żądło 2023). Good examples called by him are: the explosion of a grenade launcher (supposedly a gift from Ukrainian colleagues) in the Police Headquarters in Warsaw, precisely in the Commander in Chief's office (no dimission of the Commander in Chief) and the usage of sensitive data of a detained woman who then complained about policemen behaviour during a media statement to defend the work of Police. Other general reminds about *Principles of Professional Ethics of Policeman* which were kind of achievement in the nineties and still remain up-to-date (Pajdała 2023).

## THE POLICE AND COVID

The involvement of the police in checking the quarantine obligation and compliance with other covid restrictions (e.g. wearing masks, ban on assembly) also contributed to lowering the level of social acceptance. At the time of covid in Poland, an epidemic was in force, introduced by the ordinance of the Minister of Health, as well as the Act of March 2, 2020 on special solutions related to the prevention, counteracting and combating COVID-19, other infectious diseases and crisis situations caused by them, and changed repeatedly, the ordinance of the Council of Ministers on the establishment of certain restrictions, orders and bans in connection with the occurrence of an epidemic. The state of the epidemic is not one of the states of emergency recognized by the Polish constitution. These are: martial law, a state of emergency or a state of natural disaster. The legal basis for introducing an epidemic under the regulation of the Minister of Health is the Act of December 5, 2008 on preventing and combating infections and infectious diseases in people. In Poland, the opposition demanded the introduction of a state of emergency. Such an extraordinary state is associated with a temporary limitation of the rights and freedoms of citizens, but also with the obligation to compensate by the state, and perhaps its introduction would result in the fact that numerous restrictions would be adopted by the society with greater acceptance. However, it never happened. Meanwhile, due to the epidemic, the rights of citizens were limited. As it is clearly stated in the constitutional principle of the rule of law, restrictions on civil liberties may be imposed by the sovereign (parliament) in a general legal act, i.e. in the act – in the Polish constitution it is written in art. 31. Meanwhile, the restrictions were based on an executive act (regulation) issued by the executive authority – the Council of Ministers. Although an act was issued (the aforementioned Act of March 2, 2020), however, the changing regulations brought knowledge about the current division of the country into zones: red and yellow and with prescribed restrictions. Many Poles, instructed by anti-government lawyers, agreed to take the case to court after not collecting a ticket from the police. The judgements of common courts in Poland were on the side of citizens, assessing covid restrictions, e.g. with regard to covering the mouth and nose, as invalid: the

covid act referred to the need to cover only in the event of one's own illness or suspicion, and the executive act, i.e. the frequently changed resolutions, went further and extended this obligation to everyone. The Ombudsman also assisted citizens in these cases. Moreover, some of the restrictions were simply absurd, yet the police supervised their implementation. For example, the police ended protests of more than 5 people, treating them as illegal under the covid ordinance, and at that time there were regulations stating that 5 people from outside, apart from the household members, could be invited to the house. This means that there could be more people in private homes than in the protest. The police became the executor of the flawed law, which also affected its reputation. However, understandably, this formation found itself in a clinch. Refusing to implement the provisions would be a violation of public order for the protection of which the formation was established (Ustawa o policji 1990, art. 1).

Statistics on the activities of the Police in the era of covid are rudimentary. The [statystyka.policja.pl](http://statystyka.policja.pl) police portal has not been updated for several years. There is incomplete, local data obtained by journalists in the form of an application for disclosure of public information on the Internet. Also, some of the data mentioned below were obtained in this manner.

During Easter 2020, there was the so-called national quarantine with the prohibition to move without a valid reason, which resulted in the lack of traditional holiday gatherings. Police were ordered to monitor compliance with this national quarantine. The officers did a tremendous job while making the celebration unpleasant for a large number of citizens. During this time, during the holiday, the Police in Poland checked 125,000 people. Approximately 285 cases of non-compliance with a fine were found. By the way, the policemen found violations of other restrictions, and as a result, about 1,000 tickets and about half a thousand applications to the courts for punishment were issued. During this critical time, two thousand policemen were in quarantine and six thousand were in isolation. The policemen remaining on duty were even more burdened with duties. Roads were also checked and travellers were asked about the reason of their travel – this could result in fines of up to PLN 30,000 (then it was approximately the value of the annual minimum wage in Poland) (Dobrowicz 2020).

According to internal police data collected from March 13, 2020 to the end of 2020, during this time, police officers made 175,603 checks on the obligation to quarantine. This was how it was distributed among individual voivodeships – police garrisons. These numbers, in a way, correspond to the population density in individual voivodeships, but there are alternatives that make us look for other explanations in the case of a smaller or larger number of controls: the number of policemen from the garrison in quarantine or the more liberal or restrictive policy of the provincial commander.

**Figure 2.** *The number of mandatory quarantine checks by Police between March, 12th 2020 and Dec, 31st, 2020.*



Own elaboration based on the Police data (request for access to public information).

In the speech of the then Minister of the Interior, side by side with the Police Commander in Chief in April 2020, radical steps and a *fast path of punishment* were proposed for insubordinate citizens who do not obey the law for the sake of the common good, but break out of social solidarity. Fortunately, it was a definite minority. In a situation where in Poland there were at the same time about 150,000 people in quarantine, irregularities were found only in 0.5% of cases. The police were assisted by the Polish Army and the Military Police (Policja egzekwuje 2020). Due to the scale of the tasks, the police used a special phone application, mandatory for people in quarantine (Aplikacja Kwarantanna 2020), they also made phone calls where the people were ordered to show up in the window – this way, the police could check compliance with the quarantine obligation in many families without entering the building. And although there were positive situations that spread in the Polish Internet like wildfire, such as, for example, policemen dancing in the street for children from an orphanage while checking the quarantine obligation (Policja tańczy 2020), nevertheless, the burdensome situation both for policemen and for residents was intensifying. Police officers checked the obligation to control even several times a day (Policjanci kontrolują 2020). It happened that people accused the police of being over-zealous, e.g. checking the obligation of 14-day quarantine a few hours before its end, resulting in a fine of several thousand zlotys (Kuciński 2021).

A similar social perception was encountered by numerous inspections in catering establishments, discos, sports facilities and weddings, which places and events at different times, depending on their qualification to the red or yellow zone, were subject to various restrictions. This is shown in numbers by the data provided on request by the police and collected from August 28 to the end of 2020:

**Table 2.** *Controls of gastronomy and sport facilities, weddings and discos by Police between Aug, 21st, 2020 and Dec,31st 2020.*

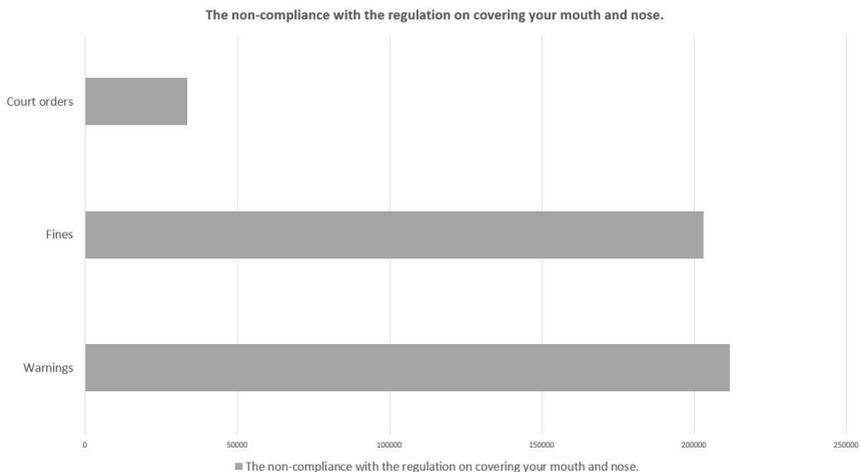
Provincial police unit	Gastronomy	Weddings	Discos	Sport facilities
KSP*	304	843	652	810
KWP** Białystok	168	739	353	265
KWP Bydgoszcz	76	315	40	201
KWP Gdańsk	243	236	840	489
KWP Gorzów Wlkp.	212	195	85	153
KWP Katowice	707	1574	794	945
KWP Kielce	350	735	245	346
KWP Kraków	197	1886	238	461
KWP Lublin	288	1064	183	318
KWP Łódź	846	927	70	643
KWP Olsztyn	207	314	67	331
KWP Opole	446	226	20	313
KWP Poznań	741	231	42	984
KWP Radom	189	718	364	138
KWP Rzeszów	178	592	277	201
KWP Szczecin	205	698	127	385
KWP Wrocław	1163	121	64	788
*Capital Police Headquarters **Provincial Police Headquarters				

Own elaboration based on the Police data (request for access to public information).

The same can be said about the issue of fines. Here, one of the statistics shows particularly clearly the citizens' insubordination to the law and, in a way, the lack of respect for the actions of the police. It is about the aforementioned defect in the law which is the basis for the obligation to cover the mouth and nose. Failure to accept a mandate from the police, which resulted in the

officers requesting a court to punish a given person, was usually equated with opposition to the restrictions and opposition to the government. Although the police superiors declared a *zero tolerance* policy towards those who did not comply with the restrictions, the policemen, on their part, tried to use the third way as often as possible, that is, by issuing a warning, thus trying to alleviate the growing social discord. For example, in one day in October 2020, 3,000 interventions related only to checking compliance with the obligation to put on a mask were made, 200 fines were issued in the amount of PLN 500 (100% more than the previous day), 30 applications were filed with the court for punishment, and in 2,600 cases, the intervention ended with an instruction (Koronawirus mandat 2020).

**Figure 3.** *The non-compliance with the regulation on covering your mouth and nose.*



**Source:** National Police Headquarters (Komenda Główna Policji).

Data collected by the police and made available to researchers allow us to identify a certain trend in police behaviour from March to the end of 2020. It turns out that the number of tickets was equal to the number of instructions, and court applications were rarely applied. The policemen realized that in this and no other line of jurisprudence in Poland, this is a way to avoid punishment, so they probably preferred to end the intervention with

a warning rather than spend time referring the case to the court, where it will be treated in a known way.

The circumstances that resulted in clashes between the police and the public were the police's compliance with covid legislation during public protests. In individual periods of the pandemic, the regulations slightly changed, but for general understanding, § 28 of the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of December 21, 2020 should be cited, on the establishment of certain restrictions, orders and bans in connection with the occurrence of an epidemic (Dziennik Ustaw 2020 item 2316), which sets the upper limit of protesters at 150, whereby they are obliged to cover their nose and mouth and keep a distance of 2 meters, and the sanitary inspector should be informed about the protest, who issues an opinion on the epidemiological threat during the assembly. In the era of great social unrest and spontaneous protests, it was difficult to respect these rules, but there were also protests where people tried to obey them, marching at intervals. In Kraków, on November 7, 2020, police officers broadcast the following message through a megaphone: *Police announcement. We have an epidemic. There is a ban on gatherings of more than 5 people. Measures of direct coercion will be used for non-compliance with the recommendations. The police are not responsible for the losses caused by them* (Łukasik 2020). What is the issue of fines during protests? A study by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR) was created, which, among others, publishes data obtained from the police upon request for disclosure of public information. According to police data obtained this way, between October 22, 2020 and January 3, 2021, 3,085 tickets and 9,280 applications to the court for punishment were issued. At that time, 22,929 people were identified during protests. (Wolność zgromadzeń 2021, p. 4). These are considerable numbers. As the HFHR points out, sometimes the participants of the protests were punished twice by criminal liability for crimes or offenses (violation of the bodily integrity of an officer, participation in an illegal assembly, refusal to identify themselves), as well as, in administrative mode, by a financial penalty from the sanitary inspector. The postulative part of the report mentions making officers aware that participation in a protest is an expression of exercising important civil rights in a democracy, which will possibly result in a change in the attitude of policemen (Wolność zgromadzeń 2021, p. 17). HFHR somehow accuses this

service of not understanding democratic values. However, taking into account that the police operate in the spirit of service to the citizens of a democratic state, and observance of the law is also a value and principle of this democratic state, apart from the indisputable need to condemn illegal behaviour of some officers, it should be stated that a serious misunderstanding lies also on the part of society, and the pandemic only showed it.

## CONCLUSION

The article presents the process of progressive social acceptance for the Police established in 1990 in place of the Citizens' Militia. In the times of the People's Republic of Poland, a citizen addressed a policeman with the words *Panie Władzo (Mr Authority)*. In contrast to that after 1990 the policeman should serve the society as a representative of the state that always protects its citizens, regardless of who is currently in charge. On the way to social acceptance, the police in Poland achieved measurable success.

From the situations and data cited in the article, it can be concluded that in crisis situations that pose a great challenge to the state, and the coronavirus pandemic undoubtedly belongs to such situations, the police suddenly lose the trust they seem to have when there are no extreme circumstances. In addition to the pandemic in Poland, the crisis was determined by the negative perceived, significant legal changes (abortion law) carried out by governing factors, intentionally or unknowingly, at that time, which triggered mass protests. State institutions, including the police, in order to deal with the accumulation of these unfavourable circumstances, used measures of direct coercion, detention, imposing fines, etc. In this way, the police lost the social support needed in crisis situations.

The coronavirus pandemic in Poland and other social phenomena that happened at that time should be treated as a test of real social acceptance for the police. Crisis situations are always such a painful verifier. In possible crisis situations, such as an earthquake, a large-scale catastrophe or a pandemic, the state, including its part, which is the police, has to deal with the further management of social affairs through these unfavourable circumstances. Then it is not only the

professionalism of the service that turns out to be important, but also acceptance for it. This can make citizens agree to limit their rights for a while in the name of the general interest. This is how the practical dimension of all polls concerning the sympathy for the district constable, noticing the activity of the police in the neighbourhood, etc. is revealed. The social crisis verifies whether a policeman is treated as a body foreign to the community or, on the contrary, as someone trusted. In Poland, the coronavirus pandemic and women's protests have shown the social distance from the police. It also leaves a pessimistic assumption for the future that the police may prove helpless in other emergencies.

One can look for the confirmation of this type of reflection and possible ways to overcome the blind spot in the police-citizen relationship in Poland in research on other countries and services that dealt with serious crises before the coronavirus pandemic (Ebola epidemic in African countries, nuclear power plant failure in Japan). How did those countries and societies overcome the crisis situations? Did the police maintain public trust and why did they do so?

In the case of Poland, one can certainly ask about the quality of Polish statehood in general. Does the Polish state as a whole enjoy public trust and is there a certain level of citizen care and standards in state-citizen relations that can be counted on regardless of the likes or dislikes of the current rulers? And why are the police not treated as part of the state apparatus which, apart from politics, stand by the citizen? You can also ask about political culture. On the one hand, the opposition factors during the pandemic, and especially during women's strikes, distanced themselves from state institutions, including the police. The police cannot stop following the law under the influence of the opposition's appeal. On the other hand, the ruling majority, which restricts civil rights through defective legislation and decides to vote on controversial abortion laws during a pandemic, and also hopes that in such a situation the police will enforce covid legislation, introduce the formation itself to the proverbial mine and refuse to notice long-term consequences for the necessary police-society cooperation. It is indisputable that the police will not be effective if they are in conflict with the community.

So far, there is no clear reflection within the service itself and now, with the sure replacement of Commander in Chief and new government taking over, there are real possibilities of improvement if only there will be a political will to do so.

Disruptions in police-public relations during a pandemic show their long-term consequences, mainly as a stable lack of trust and bad judgement from the public. It seems impossible for this experience to remain unworked through. The coming years will show whether the plunge in the level of social trust of the police can be overcome for good.

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